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SOME misguided Americans think that the less the CIA knows the better. The more ignorant the spooks are about Fidel Castro or Moammar Khadafy, their argument goes, the more likely it is they will only try to take them out with exploding cigars or lasers implanted in the navels of belly dancers — and the safer the world will be.

They're dead wrong, of course. More thoughtful citizens will welcome news that the CIA has its analysts out picking the brains of professors at universities across the country. Ten years ago, most professors would not get within spitting distance of a CIA employee. Today, according to the CIA's deputy director for intelligence, Robert Gates, "we're working (with professors) on an awful lot of issues we weren't working on 10 years ago."

The atmosphere on campus has changed. True, some students still demonstrate when, as at Brown University three semesters ago, CIA recruiters actually set foot on campus. But most of the new contacts involve trips to seminars on, say, the budget situation in Papua/New Guinea, or funds for academic research.

The new chumminess between

scholars and spooks is not without risk. A minor scandal erupted at Harvard recently when it was learned that a professor had accepted some CIA support for a seminar and a book on Islamic fundamentalism in return for a CIA veto over aspects of the book's contents — which is, as it should be, against university regulations. It turned out that the professor had informed Harvard administrators of his deal with the CIA, but they did nothing about it.

So there will always be reason to question how far the CIA should venture into academe. Just as there are sensible reasons for CIA concern over what academics might publish as a result of their access to classified information.

Still, it seems ridiculous to oppose efforts by the agency to probe the minds of men and women more learned in many subjects than its own analysts. "What we are after is people who will challenge us constructively, offer us a different perspective, who will stir up the pot a bit," said Mr. Gates.

If that can be accomplished without compromising academic freedom and integrity, the nation's security can only be enhanced.